

Refugee Information Exchange Conference Summary

Introduction

On September 4, 2002, the California Department of Social Services' (CDSS) Refugee Programs Branch (RPB) held the Thirteenth Annual Refugee Information Exchange Conference at the San Diego Marriott Hotel in San Diego, California. The conference was co-sponsored by the California Arts Council, California Department of Aging, California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs, California Department of Child Support, California Department of Developmental Services, California Department of Health Services, California Department of Mental Health, California Department of Motor Vehicles, California Department of Rehabilitation, California Employment Development Department, California Highway Patrol, California State Refugee Forum, and the Managed Risk Medical Insurance Board.

Opening Session

This year's conference Opening Session began with a slide presentation set to music, highlighting refugee arrivals, progress and success, and featuring well-known refugees in America. Ms. Thuan Nguyen, RPB Chief acknowledged Mr. Chea Lim from Orange County Cambodian Family for the profound presentation.

Ms. Ginny Uyeno-Bridy, on behalf of Dr. Roger Lum, Director of the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency welcomed participants to the County and mentioned that 90,000 refugees had resettled in San Diego since 1980.

Mr. Bruce Wagstaff, Deputy Director, Welfare to Work Division, (CDSS) welcomed attendees to the Thirteenth Annual Conference "**America: Our New Home.**" He spoke of the theme and how appropriate the meaning of the theme, the impact of September 11th tragic events, and how people are rebounding with a new sense of purpose and providing support to all those affected. He highlighted the accomplishments of the RPB, which included mental health training, media training, outreach to asylees, and recognizing trafficking victims.

Ms. Thuan Nguyen presented a message from CDSS Director, Rita Saenz. Ms. Saenz recognized the struggles, obstacles, and striving for education and self-sufficiency of refugees. She acknowledged talents and skills that refugees bring to California, their stories of survival, overcoming cultural barriers, and obtaining the "American Dream." When working as partners in governmental, religious, non-profit, and community based organizations, we have the ability to provide successful training and services for refugees.

Plenary Session I

With a distinguished panel discussing the "Concerns and Current Issues Facing Refugees" many points were shared with the audience. The panel consisted of: Michael McKinley, U.S. Department of State; Kathleen Thompson, Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS); and Larry Yungk, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Each panel member shared a wealth of information and addressed the current climate in each organization.

Mr. McKinley thanked the partners in California. He stated that he was aware how California was struggling with low arrival numbers, but we all work together to make refugee resettlement a humanitarian component to our program. He stated that in the aftermath of September 11th it was necessary to implement security enhancements and to suspend processing in India and Pakistan due to threats in those regions. To accomplish that, the State Department hired hundreds of people overseas to strengthen processing. At home, the State Department has been working with the voluntary agencies to implement standards of care. He further spoke on humanitarian efforts, work with resettlement agencies, providing assistance and durable solutions, and continuing to work with partners to overcome issues for refugees.

As acknowledged by Mr. McKinley, Ms. Thompson also acknowledged a difficult year. She stated that the Commissioner of the INS is a strong supporter of refugees. In the aftermath of September 11th she indicated there have been many changes resulting in added delays of incoming refugees. The merging of INS and the Department of Homeland Security brings additional issues which are being looked at regarding changes to the process. But at this time, it is not clear how the INS will be structured. For the refugee, the INS is the decision-maker on each individual case. There are three processing priorities:

- UNHCR or a U.S. Embassy Referral
- Group Characteristics
- Family Reunification

The INS determines if the individual meets the refugee definition, should be resettled in another country and does not have a criminal background. Processing has resumed with increased security enhancements. They are looking at changes to expedite some of the process (i.e. taking fingerprints outside the U.S., verifying family relationships, and relatives for reunification).

Larry Yungk stated that in the wake of September 11th, the UNHCR is re-visiting how it does business in terms of better documentation to satisfy the increased security concerns around the world. UNHCR is working with advocacy groups to better serve refugees.

Plenary Session II

The distinguished panel members were Mr. Leonard Glickman – Refugee Council USA/Hebrew Immigration; Mr. Frank Sharry – National Immigration Forum; and Mr. Bill Frelick – Amnesty International USA.

Mr. Glickman discussed the humanitarian aspect both domestically and internationally and how very important to keep that in mind when advocating for the refugee. Resettlement programs are in crisis and it is a human crisis. The program is at risk of losing support from the government. Embassies have been shut down; therefore, little or no processing is occurring. He stated strong advocacy is needed to increase the ceiling for admissions.

Mr. Sharry urged us all to keep working, as everyone has, to be an advocate. There is a need to advocate for policy and refugees. Three things have occurred. First, since September 11th there has been a backlash; second, the backlash needs to be reversed; and third, there is a strong need to advocate. It is a security versus liberties issue. Advocacy needs to be communicated in the values that refugees and immigrants provide. Advocate how they are contributing and can contribute to the economy, utilizing their experience and knowledge to become and remain self-sufficient. We need to protect the rights of refugees and immigrants to uphold immigration's long history of enriching the United States.

The third panel member was Bill Frelick. His thoughts were focused on solutions as the key. Refugee resettlement has been a slow process since September 11th. September 11th has added complications to an already difficult situation. Refugees are people who have lost their human rights from their own government, and other governments may not be sympathetic to the cause or urgency and sometimes inadvertently make the situations just as precarious for the refugee. Asylum is becoming less and less secure. The United States can be a leader for solutions by planning and identifying cases. There is a strong need to make the system work and be committed.

Town Hall Meeting

Dr. Nguyen Van Hanh, Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), restated the impact of September 11th, decreasing refugee arrival numbers throughout the nation, and the emotional toll of those events. ORR recognizes the low arrival numbers are only about 35% of the numbers of the annual ceiling. Additionally, ORR anticipates low arrival numbers for next year and they are reviewing the situation state by state.

Dr. Van Hanh announced that California has been granted a waiver to serve those here longer than 60 months with Refugee Employment and Social Services (RESS) funding. He then introduced ORR staff and explained that the organization is undergoing a re-organization and that changing roles and responsibilities will bring new staff for California.

Luncheon Keynote Addresses

Our first day luncheon speaker was Louis Marie Bureyeya, an asylee who fled his Central African country of Rwanda following the civil war between Hutu and Tutsi which resulted in the death of over one million people. He came to the United States on Christmas 1993. He filed for and was granted political asylum with the help of Catholic Charities.

Mr. Bureyeya was formerly employed as a shuttle driver with National Rent a Car, in addition to a second job at Hydranautics where he worked for four years. In his quest to improve his future, he enrolled at San Diego City College where he studied computer science for six months.

Mr. Bureyeya earned his commercial license to drive 18 wheeler trucks and worked for Covenant and J.B. Hunt for a year respectively. In 2000, Mr. Bureyeya decided to implement his long term dreams to own his own small business. He successfully opened a Smoke Shop, working between 60-70 hours per week and has two part-time employees who assist him. He was graciously able to share his difficult experience with the audience and was able to show his appreciation for the opportunities he has had in his new country.

Madalenna Lai, our second day luncheon speaker, had a dream. She came to the United States in 1975 with her four children, (ranging in age from 22 months to nine years old) along with her sister and her five children, escaping by boat from Vietnam. Ms. Lai and her family went from Guam to Pennsylvania before moving to Pasadena. That was the first time she saw the Tournament of Roses Parade on New Year's Day. She was so impressed she promised herself that day that if she succeeded in this country, she would sponsor a float to express her gratitude. By 1994, with her children having finished college, Ms. Lai applied to sponsor a float in the Tournament of Roses Parade. This year, after eight years of applying, Ms. Lai achieved her dream of getting her application approved. Her freedom float carried the message "Thank you, America and the World." She shared her personal experience with the audience and made them laugh, cry, and appreciate all she went through when she first arrived. She presented a beautiful plaque to the Department which exhibits a picture of the float and sentiments to the United States of America for all that was done on her behalf.

Workshops

Throughout this year's conference there were 23 workshops available to participants, offering up a great diversity of topics to choose from.

Among the workshops available were:

- Transitioning Renters to Homeowners: Benefits, Challenges, and Resources. At this well attended workshop presenters noted benefits, challenges, and resources to home ownership. Also discussed was that preparation for ownership includes money management and taking control of your finances. Developing a good record keeping system and exercising willpower are keys to a good money management plan. Participants learned about various affordable housing resources in California and how to assist people in achieving economic sustainability.
- Integrating Communities and Refugees: This workshop examined the challenges refugees face in integrating into American society. Building and maintaining mental health is viewed as an essential part of the integration process. All service providers - mental health professionals, teachers, job developers, and case workers-can play an important role in a refugee's cultural adjustment and integration. Teachers that teach English as a Second Language (ESL) are often among the first resources available to help refugees adapt to a new cultural environment. Although their primary responsibility is to teach English, there is potential for the classroom to be an environment where refugees can make significant progress toward adjusting to new life in an unfamiliar culture.
- The Attorney General's (AG) office provided "Safe from the Start:" Reducing Children's Exposure to Violence. The presenter identified a number of dangerous effects of violence or exposure to violence on children. Resources available to help parents were shared with the audience. The AG's office provides technical training and consultation to counties to curb violence and its exposure, targeting children. This workshop was very interactive by the nearly full room. The presenter wanted to increase public awareness and support families and provide leadership to support local communities. He also encouraged the audience members to access their website for valuable information at www.safefromthestart.org.
- Micro-enterprise: An Asset-Building Strategy provided the audience with definitions of micro-enterprise. Also discussed were asset development, along with who are micro-entrepreneurs and the benefits of a micro-enterprise. Implications for refugee programs were discussed as a study on micro-enterprise was reviewed. Audience participation was part of the workshop as each participant did "Test your E.Q. (Entrepreneurial Quotient)." The workshop was well attended.

- The focus of Culture Therapy as a Mental Health Therapy: Healing for Refugee Communities and Finding New Paths to Multi-Cultural Understanding covered the role of arts and culture and the means that these may play in assisting refugees with resettlement efforts. These types of therapies can assist the refugee to gain energy and emotional strength, and to overcome hurdles such as depression, loss, and cultural adjustment that undermine efforts to become self-sufficient. The arts as a means for restoring confidence, releasing energy, and developing insight and empathy have been recognized in the field of Expressive Arts Therapies. The audience learned how art therapies can directly benefit individuals who are refugees as well as whole refugee communities.
- This full house was anxious to learn about TANF/CalWORKS: 60 Month Time Limits. Exceptions to the time limit were identified and many questions were asked of the presenter. A list of resources that provides more information on the exceptions was given as a handout so the audience could learn more details.
- New Americans: Outreach Efforts By Federal, State, and Local Agencies covered the Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center efforts by the federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. The panel discussed efforts to overcome reluctance by refugee communities to trust law enforcement agencies due to unfortunate experiences with same in their native lands; and in dealing with actual or potential hate-crime situations. Unique challenges the refugee population faces include language, culture, employment, etc.; crises and conflicts which might arise in domestic situations; and outside pressures and problems which can develop from interaction with outside populations. Strategies of outreach, education, and law enforcement to deal with newcomers were discussed. Particular challenges agencies face, such as the underreporting of hate crimes and their possible causes, and the tools in place to overcome these, were shared with the audience. Further discussed was the growing concern of fraudulent immigration "consultants" preying on innocent newcomers and efforts to combat this fraudulent activity. The panel member from the Concord Police Department gave a case history of Concord's Monument Community Partnership, a multi-agency effort addressing various aspects of newcomers' experiences with task forces on education, economic development, health and housing. There was a large attendance with thought-provoking questions posed throughout the program.
- The State Personnel Board provided the audience with State Employment Opportunities for California's Refugees. The workshop shared many career opportunities within State service, with the emphasis on diversity. The power point presentation provided examples of job announcements, testing and promotional exams, and how to navigate the State Personnel Board website. Several handouts were available including applications, job announcements, and pamphlets on employment. The audience was engaged by the presenter with her asking questions of individuals and showing how to customize an application, applying experience to meet the requirements of a job announcement. The

audience consisted of several refugee service providers that shared employment issues, such as refugees who were professionals in their native country but do not know how to translate that professional certification, licensure, or degree here. The presenter shared several ideas with the audience. There was a lively question and answer period toward the end of the workshop, and the presenter was accessible to individuals after the presentation.

- Presenters represented the Federal, State, and County governments, and an advocacy group who each addressed Civil Rights/Language Access. This information will be helpful to refugees and refugee groups in understanding their rights to information about public services and benefits and what to do if they do not have access to, or cannot understand, information about such services. In order to become self-sufficient, refugees must be able to work effectively within the system of government programs and information. Unless the information is available to them, they may take longer or possibly fail to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. The presenters shared the flow of civil rights requirements, and the basic requirements for investigating and resolving complaints. There was a short question and answer period, and the panel members remained accessible for one-on-one discussion.
- Achieving Long Term Self-Sufficiency Through Health Partnerships provided a large audience with information on various programs and partnerships that have been developed within Sacramento and Los Angeles counties. Alternative ways to address health conditions of newly arriving refugees for more successful resettlement and self-sufficiency were presented.
- Case Management Best Practices found the audience completely involved when the first presenter asked everyone to introduce themselves and discuss their role in the case management process, providing what insights they had to offer about their experience and techniques. An overview of case management was discussed, highlighting its relevance to every provided service and the elements that make good case management. The second panel member followed the history of her agency's experiences in case management, how it has evolved and what they have done in the field. The last presenter concluded with comments on the positive impact of effective case management on clients, such as how they benefit from their training and how their skills develop. It made for a lively and very well attended workshop.
- The presenters for the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) were well-versed in their topic and provided the audience with information on the new method by which CalWorks grants, General Assistance, Refugee Cash Assistance, and Food Stamps will be disbursed to the public. The EBT card will work very much like an Automated Teller Machine card. They provided website information along with two brochures and a paper copy of their power point presentation.

- ESL and Employment: Preparing Refugees for the Job Market provided insight to the workplace expectations regarding culture and communication that are not always clear to newcomers. This workshop addressed the employment difficulties for refugees. Four areas were emphasized by the presenters: First, effective communication included a “listen-repeat-do” exercise, clarification strategies, and body language. Second, tips were given for the job interview, starting and ending an interview, and active listening. Third, “Steps to the Future,” covered realistic job expectations, understanding the importance of entry-level jobs, and career planning. Lastly, there was a group discussion on solving problems on the job.
- Hmong Teen Suicide Prevention, Awareness and Education was a sensitive topic that provided the audience with information on the Hmong culture and what puts Hmong children at risk. There was discussion about the Task Force that is actively involved at all levels of the community. The history of the task force, its intentions, group composition and mission statement were shared. Suicide attempts by Hmong adolescents in Fresno County were reviewed with other related statistics. Strategies and tips for professionals as they assist Hmong families were also emphasized.
- The presentation From Community Assessments to Health Programs: Successful Experiences with New Refugee Communities covered three areas in conducting community assessments with new refugee communities: lessons learned, how to’s, benefits and drawbacks. The summary findings were shared from: a San Francisco based Russian community assessment; a leadership development/community building program with Bosnian refugees that was identified in a community assessment; and a successful Russian-speaking community tobacco awareness project that also was initiated from a community assessment.
- New Community Avenues to Refugee Health and Well-Being covered the five refugee projects currently offered by Santa Clara Valley Hospital and Health Care System. The diverse projects are focused on health promotion and intervention. The current projects include: 1) a photo voice assessment to identify health concerns and needs among refugee groups; 2) the Community Health Promotion Project that encourages Somali refugees to play an active role in their health and the health of their community. 3) diabetes case management for Bosnian and Russian clients by the Refugee Clinic, and 4) a smoking cessation program for newly arriving refugees, which provides tobacco education materials, clinical and medical assessment, and intervention, referral services and client follow-up. The audience learned about the model, the challenges, and successes. Information was shared regarding processes, identifying effective approaches, the cultural challenges, and enhancing healthy adoption of refugee children and youth.

- Individual Development Accounts (IDAs): Strengthening Individuals and Families. Increasingly IDA programs have become a way for communities to assist refugees, asylees, and immigrants, as well as low income people, to gain a stake in the American Dream. IDAs were described as a matched savings account an individual/household maintains over a set period of time up to certain limits toward a long-term asset. They can be used to obtain assets such as homes, micro-enterprise/small business, and higher education. Certain IDA refugee programs include the purchase of vehicles, computers, and sometimes home repair. The monies used in IDAs must be earned income and a contract is required to be signed by the participant. The monies saved are matched at some ratio and retained in a parallel account that cannot be accessed by the saver until the contract agreement is met. Classes are critical to IDA programs and include topics such as financial literacy, budgeting, credit counseling, and financial planning. It was noted that keys to establishing an IDA program are identifying a mission and goals, finding and nurturing partnerships, seeking resources for a matching ratio and operations, establishing a good banking relationship, developing a training plan, creating solid program processes and administrative systems, and establishing an evaluation component.
- Distinctions were made between components that serve “after-school” youth (specifically those still attending classes) and “out-of-school” youths (graduated, drop-outs, etc.) in the After-School Programs for Refugee Youths workshop. One of the presenters indicated that there is English language training of Somali, Mexican, and Cambodian youth in the program, highlighting the balance between school work, recreation, and sport activities. The audience learned about an array of services the organization provides through education, advocacy, mentoring, and outreach. One of the panel members was recently appointed Director of RefugeeWorks Refugee Youth Project and outlined plans to implement their California Refugee Youth Initiative. This project will ultimately provide technical assistance and consultation to four communities within the state. The panel provided the audience with advice that works on implementing practices which could aid their communities. Audience participation was key to the sharing of ideas.
- Job Upgrading and Recredentialing looked at rethinking incentives, moving to the next level for careers and thinking beyond to include career laddering. The five (5) year rule being waived brings exciting new times to reframe or return to prior careers. Organizations were asked what is working and what is not. Advantages and disadvantages of reframing or recertification were discussed. A key factor is to let the client define terms of a job upgrade and develop resources for evaluations of the credentials that can be applied to valid licensure and/or certification for their professions in the United States.

- Expanding Working Relationships Within the Aging Network discussed the greatest challenge facing elderly refugees: reliable transportation to meal sites. Meal sites provide culturally appropriate food as various ethnicities dine together. The majority of elders do not use public transportation because they do not speak or read English. It was indicated that nutrition programs need to include additional services such as community education on health and mental health issues, dietary education, and recreational opportunities. In addition, another concern that faces the elderly refugee community is their relationship with their younger generation. Involvement of younger generations with their elders was encouraged. The Area Agency on Aging, along with other organizations, should be developing a plan for culturally appropriate and geographically accessible meal sites where needed. As the refugee population grows older there will be a need to anticipate services for any underserved communities.
- An overview of human trafficking and modern-day slavery in the United States was presented in Human Trafficking: Refugee Benefits and Victim Services workshop. The audience learned statistics, a description of trafficking, what kind of people are trafficked and who are the traffickers. Challenges and rewards of working with trafficked persons were discussed. The audience learned of services available and some of the legal issues. The “Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000” and the role of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a description of what severe trafficking means, and who qualifies for benefits along with immigration issues were presented.
- The workshop titled The Role of Financial Education and Vocational Training in Job Retention and Career Upgrade for Refugees targeted the working poor with dependent children. It covered how financial education can supplement job training enabling refugees to maximize long-term financial stability and self-sufficiency. Among the points discussed: financial literacy can assist new arrivals in understanding the workplace, their compensation and financial obligations (paychecks, money, bank accounts, credit cards, taxes); once the refugee is more settled, vocational training enhances earning opportunities while financial education allows an individual to manage their money and start saving through programs such as IDAs; programs looking at retirement and encouraging a life-long approach to career enhancement encourage a long-term perspective of self-sufficiency in the United States. There is outreach through radio advertisement, flyers, and community presentations. Currently there is a waiting list to get into the program.
- Getting Your Program Funded explored various funding sources available and how to apply. This was a well attended workshop. Each presenter spoke specifically on what funding organizations look for in an applications for funding, giving a wide range of perspectives to participants. With federal and state budget cuts looming, community-based organizations will be looking to foundations to fund programs targeting immigrant and refugee populations. The speakers shared with the audience the way that foundations operate, how they

identify their priority giving areas and select programs to fund. Emphasis was given to the various organizations applying for funding to be as specific as possible about their programs, as they are the experts. Organizations may hire a grant proposal writer for a small fee to assist them.

Conclusion

On Friday, September 6, 2002, the 13th Annual Refugee Information Exchange Conference came to a close after a successful three days of valuable and meaningful workshops and dynamic, informative speakers. There were well over 300 participants in attendance that provided feedback by way of an evaluation. Within the summary is the essence of what each speaker and workshop presenters offered to the participants. The closing session acknowledged all the speakers, co-sponsors, exhibitors and participants for their positive efforts and encouraged them to share conference information with the refugee communities.